

Stewardship Weekend Sermonettes – Year A

First Lesson & Commentary – Treasures

There's an old axiom that used to get thrown around about giving church offerings: "you should give until it hurts." Anybody ever heard that? The idea is that church offerings should be so important to you and such a big part of your household budget that it hurts your ability to do many other things with your finances. The problem is, that might have been a good way to twist people's arms into filling up the offering plate, but it really wasn't a good way for people to give their treasures to Jesus with a God-pleasing attitude.

Well the nation of Israel throughout its history had a problem with that, too. Malachi was the last prophet of the Old Testament. During his life, some years after the Israelites had returned from captivity in Babylon, the temple had been rebuilt to just a barebones level and many people had spent more time building up their own houses and properties instead. But the city of Jerusalem was still a broken down warzone, and the service of God's house was not being given the respect and priority it deserved. So here God called on his people to return, to repent.

Only his message wasn't, "give until it hurts" – his message was, "give until it *doesn't* hurt," because he promised that when they gave their offerings generously out of genuine faith and love, he would pour out so many blessings that their hearts and lives would burst. "*Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,*" says the LORD Almighty, "*and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.*" See, the God of all the universe doesn't *need* our money; but he does *want* our love, and he knows that the way we humans work is that the things we treasure in our hearts are the things we support practically with our lives and resources. That's an all-important lesson for us to learn about our church offerings – what truly matters about any of our offerings in God's sight, whether they be treasures, time, talents, or anything else, isn't the sheer amount of the offering (as if we're going to impress God that way!). It's the attitude of faith that comes from a generous heart of love and thanks to God, and that's going to dictate all the other details of the offerings we give. That's why the first thing God says to the Israelites here isn't, "Return the *back pay* you still owe me;" it's "Return to *me*" – God wants our hearts full of love and faith first and foremost, because he knows that material offerings to support his work will naturally follow with them.

No, what matters in God's sight isn't the amount of an offering as such; it's the *proportionality*. God wants us to give in proportion to our income, true – that's why he uses the word *tithe* here, which means a 10% portion of our possessions. That's still a great guideline to shoot for! But even more, he wants us to give in proportion to the love and thankfulness we have for him and everything he's done for us. God doesn't want us to just give from our surplus, from our *leftovers* – no matter how much they might be. No, God wants us to give our firstfruits from our hearts, to prioritize supporting the Lord's work first and foremost in faith.

The truth is, generous stewardship of the treasures God gives us is a privilege and joy for believers. God has blessed each of us richly, and now he calls us to return a portion of our blessings back to him in love and thanks and support for his Gospel ministry that's meant so much for our lives and eternities. See, for Christians, *not* giving back to God is just unthinkable. God calls that robbery here, because most of all it's robbing God of the tokens of love and thanks that should come from a heart of living faith. I mean, what does it say about our heart and our faith if we don't desire to be generous toward our Savior-God who's been so good and generous to us first? No rather, let's use our offerings to prove our love for our Savior and to support his work so that more and more can come to know Christ along with us.

In the real world, ministry costs money, it's true. But what's also true is that the more money we have, the more and better ministry we can do together. So when you go home this week, I want you to give special thought to how fully and how well you're supporting the Lord's work here at Good Shepherd. Take a lesson from Malachi – don't let worldly distractions keep you from giving God's work and God's house the respect and priority it deserves. Or maybe it's that you just don't have much or the economy has really put the squeeze on your finances. That's okay, God knows your heart – and he knows that the best offerings come from a genuine intention to support God's work generously, with whatever you have. The best way to replace that financial *hurt* with peace and contentment, with joy and fulfillment is to confidently and generously put it in God's hands, because he's got more blessings in store for us than we could ever possibly imagine. So friends, let's all give God the best we can – faithfully, generously, and proportionately – because that's what he gave to us first, and we know that we can never out-give him.

Second Lesson & Commentary – Time

I knew a man when I first started out as a pastor who gave me some needed advice: *Everyone’s busy. Don’t let yourself think that you are any busier than anyone else.* On the one hand, he was trying to keep me humble with all the hours and possibilities that can sometimes go with pastoral ministry. But on the other hand, he was trying to teach me the importance of setting priorities for time in the Christian life.

I wonder if that was in Paul’s view at all when he told the Romans, “*Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the faith God has distributed to each of you.*” See, when Paul wrote this letter, he had never been to Rome. He didn’t know any of these people yet. He was looking forward to meeting them, but he didn’t know them, their stories, their gifts. Yet he knew exactly how life in this world works, no matter where and when. He knew that God gives every one of us time and opportunities to serve him, and he wants us to use them faithfully.

Well, the more things change, the more they stay the same, don’t they. God still gives us those same 24 hours every day to serve him, and the world will still clog up our schedules with anything but service if we let it. Finding time for service is not easy, especially with all the other responsibilities and activities dividing our attention. And then even if you are willing to help around church, there’s so much that can be complicated nowadays with codes and regulations and red tape and technology and finances and everything else. It can be tough and intimidating! But friends, God doesn’t expect expertise when we give him our time. What he wants is willingness to learn and try and do our best, and trust that God can use even simple folks like me and you to do great things in his Kingdom. There is nothing God loves more than a willing heart dedicated to doing good.

See, when it comes to contributing to the ongoing function of this congregation, what matters most of all is that we are all here together doing the Lord’s work and serving faithfully in whatever capacity he’s given to us, because the truth is that every one of us is important and invaluable to the mission of God’s church. Faithful Christian stewardship of our time isn’t really about *what* we can do, at least not at its heart. It’s so much more about just *being there* alongside everyone else, working shoulder-to-shoulder, striving to learn and help and grow and improve and even train if necessary, and finding a way for everyone to fit together

to complete the big, beautiful puzzle that is Christian life and service in this world.

So what that takes is time and investment, and *taking* time in this busy modern world means intentionally *making* time for service and stewardship. I don’t have to tell you how busy we all are. But I also hope I don’t have to tell you how much your God loves you and wants your commitment and how much we Christians need each other. We make time for the things that mean the most to us, so for the sake of your Savior, friends, let’s make sure we’re purposefully and intentionally *making* time to serve him. Whether it’s ushering at church or working with our ladies groups or helping hand out pumpkins or being a part of a congregational meeting or work day or whatever else, prioritize it, put it on the calendar, and plan around it.

You know, volunteerism is the grease in the gears of every successful non-profit organization out there, and that’s certainly true for God’s Church too. Paul says it is a gift of God’s grace to get an opportunity to serve the Church; he even *commands* us here to make good on those opportunities! So maybe that changes the way we should think about making a commitment to serve on a board or committee or even as a Sunday School teacher. Any opportunity to serve God and his Church is a gift and a privilege, and the fact is that there are all kinds of opportunities to take part in the mission and work of this congregation – just look in the service folder or check the weekly email or the bulletin board in the narthex and you’ll find plenty of ways to do that throughout the year. Or if you have other, better ideas to share, that’s great, too! In Christ’s church, everyone has a place, everyone has a voice, and everyone has a part to play. It’s just a matter of taking the time and seizing the opportunity.

No, dedicating yourself and your time to God’s service isn’t any easier nowadays than it was back in Paul’s day. But we can’t afford to use our busyness as an excuse to be passive with our time and opportunities in this world, especially when busyness is so often our own choice. That life clock just keeps on ticking, so we need to be active in prioritizing what our souls and God’s Church most need, and giving our time and effort toward supporting that however and whenever we can. So like Paul and the Romans, let’s put God’s grace to good use in our lives; let’s be thankful for all the time and opportunities God gives us together; and let’s all be united and engaged to take advantage of them for his glory.

Third Lesson & Commentary – Talents

There was really nothing unfair or unclear about what this rich man did when he entrusted his wealth to his servants while he was gone. There were no ifs, ands, or buts about it – this master had expectations that he wanted to see fulfilled, and by all accounts he set his servants up perfectly well to fulfill them. Before he left town, he called his servants together and gave them each a number of *talents* of gold, the original Greek says – that was a weight measurement that was roughly equivalent to 20 years' worth of a common laborer's wages. While he was gone those servants were to do whatever they saw fit with the money they were given, and when he returned to settle up, we hear those three servants reporting back to him. The first two were commended by the rich man and rewarded for the work they did, but the last one was condemned and lost everything.

Well, this is a story that can come across a little harsh at first glance, especially with how it ends up; but it's also a story that bears in it some important truths when it comes to our stewardship of the talents God gives us. Maybe more than anything, this story really speaks to that idea that we are stewards, managers or caretakers of something that does not truly belong to us. I mean, remember who all the money came from in the parable. It didn't belong to the servants; it was the rich man's. He entrusted it to them to be used faithfully, in accordance with his wishes, and in a way that would further his purposes.

And the same thing still goes for the *talents*, the special gifts and unique abilities each of us has in our lives, too. They come from the Giver of every good and perfect gift, and he gives them for a reason: so that we use those gifts in his service. See, when God gives us a blessing, he always gives it to us with a purpose. He gives blessings *to* us so that he can give blessings *through* us. Just like in the parable Jesus told here, our God didn't give us our gifts to be hidden or hoarded. No, he gave them to us so that they could be utilized and shared.

And that's a truth that's important for us to come to terms with. We have some very special people here at Good Shepherd who have unique skills and abilities and training that not just anybody else does. We have people who are big and strong; we have people who are very wise and intelligent; we have people who are very people-savvy and technologically-inclined; we have people who can do all sorts of construction and automotive and handyman work; we have people who are excellent with financial planning, budgeting, and investment; and of

course that's only scratching the surface of the many gifts that God has given to his people here at Good Shepherd. God has given those talents as gifts of his grace, purely because he loves you and delights in you and because he wants you to be able to use those gifts to provide for yourselves, your families, your community, and your congregation. God has given you those talents so that you can serve those around you in love and glorify him in return for all his goodness. That's what he *wants* to see, and that's what he *loves* to see.

So then what a special comfort it is the way the master in our parable here commended his servants. He didn't commend them based on their results; he commended them based on their attitude. Did you notice that? It wasn't about how much extra money they earned; what he was most delighted with was the fact that they were trustworthy with whatever they were given. So that means if you're feeling a little left out or like you don't stack up around here, you don't have to feel that way because your life and your service to God isn't about comparing yourself to others. It's about being faithful to your loving Lord.

No, service to God isn't a matter of *whether* you have gifts or not. It's a matter of identifying *what* gifts you do have and how you can find a way to apply them in your life and in God's church. Yes, some people's gifts might be more obvious than others – even in the story, each servant had more or fewer talents they were given – but sometimes those whose gifts make them more fit for behind the scenes support are actually the most valuable in God's plan. After all, it isn't the shingles and the siding that keeps a house standing. It's the foundation and the framework. And you too can be that foundation of God's church when you stop worrying about what you *don't* have to give and when you start giving whatever you *do* have in faith and love; in words, attitudes, and actions. So forget the fears and excuses that tempt us to turn into that third servant, to hide our gifts and not use them the way our God intends, and know instead that Jesus is ready and eager to say to you one day, too, "*Well done, good and faithful servant!*" Yes, you too have been given special talents, special *trusts* from God that are worth far more than any bag of gold, and so that means every single one of us has unique gifts and abilities to use in his service. So friends, *let's use them* faithfully, well, and to his glory. Amen.